

Robert A. Seiple

Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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Hearing on the First Annual Department of State Report
on International Religious Freedom

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to be here today to testify about the Department of State's first Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. I consider it an honor to appear before you, knowing as I do the key role played by you and the Committee in promoting religious freedom and in creating the International Religious Freedom Act.

The Nature of the Problem

We share a common vision--a simple, but profound vision. It is to help people who suffer because of their religious faith. Such people live literally around the globe, and they number in the millions. They live in fear, afraid to speak of what they believe. They worship "underground" in 21st century catacombs, lest authorities discover and punish their devotion to an authority beyond the state. They languish in prisons, and suffer torture, simply because they love God in their own way.

They are children, stolen from their parents, sold into slavery and forced to convert to another religion. They are Christian mothers, searching for their missing sons. They are Buddhist monks in "reeducation camps," Jews imprisoned on trumped-up charges of "espionage," Muslims butchered for being the wrong kinds of Muslims. They hail from every region and race, and their blood cries out to us. Not for vengeance, but for help, and for redress.

Nor should we speak of human suffering merely in terms of numbers.

Suffering has a face. You will forgive me if I repeat a story I have told elsewhere. In my office there is a lovely watercolor painting of a house and garden. The painted scene is one of peace, which reflects the forgiveness in the artist's heart. But that painting has its origins in hatred. The artist is a young Lebanese woman named Mary, who at the age of 18 was fleeing her village after it was overrun by militia. Mary was caught by a militiaman who demanded with his gun that she renounce her faith or die.

She refused to renounce her faith, and the bullet severed her spinal cord. Today Mary paints her paintings of forgiveness with a paintbrush braced in her right hand. She represents both the painful consequences of religious persecution, and the best fruits of religion. Mary is filled with physical suffering, yet she forgives. In so doing, she points the way to an enduring answer to religious persecution, and that is, of course, reconciliation. In order to have forgiveness and reconciliation, we must elevate the notion of universal human dignity--the idea that every human being has an inherent and inviolable worth. Lest we forget the face of suffering, or of forgiveness, I have dedicated the first annual report Annual Report for International Religious Freedom to Mary.

The Value of the Hearing

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, you are to be commended for your work on this issue and for calling this hearing. Together with the International Religious Freedom Act and our new Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, this hearing will sharpen the focus for those of us who may be in a position to help, while at the same time it will provide hope to believers in every place where hope is in short supply, and where each day brings fear of more persecution.

This hearing also provides an opportunity for me to highlight some of our efforts to encourage greater respect for freedom of religion abroad. We are all aware that religious liberty is the "first freedom" of our own Bill of Rights, and is cherished by many Americans as the most precious of those rights granted by God and to be protected by governments. This Congress was wise in recognizing that freedom of religion, and--in a religious context--freedom of conscience, expression, and association, are also among the founding principles of international human rights covenants. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, as well as other human rights instruments, grant citizens of the world the right to freedom of religion. As a consequence, when we go to officials of foreign governments to urge them to protect religious freedom, we are not asking them to "do it our way." We are asking them to live up to the commitments they have made--both to their own people, and to the world.

The IRF Report

Mr. Chairman and Members, as you well know, on October 27th of last year, President Clinton signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Section 102 of that bill calls for the submission to Congress of an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom to supplement the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by providing additional detailed information with respect to matters involving international religious freedom.

With every passing year, the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices earn increasing praise from human rights activists, academics and the public at large for fairness, consistency, and thoroughness of reporting. We have made this progress because we are constantly looking for ways to improve reporting. A section on religious freedom has always been a feature of the Country Reports, and it will continue to be.

On September 9 we submitted to Congress a separate 1100-page report on International Religious Freedom. The report covers 194 countries, and focuses exclusively on the status of religious freedom in each. I would like publicly to thank the hundreds of Foreign Service Officers worldwide who helped research, draft, corroborate, and edit this new report. They all deserve praise for their work, which was both timely and professional. I want to extend a special thanks to officers in the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, in particular the staff of the Office of Country Reports and Asylum Affairs. These dedicated officers worked overtime, literally and figuratively, in order to meet the deadline, and to produce the best possible product. Finally, I wish to thank my own staff in the Office of International Religious Freedom, not only for their hard work, but for their love of their work. They are proud to say, as you do in the International Religious Freedom Act, that the United States "stands with the persecuted."

The report applies to all religions and beliefs. It targets no particular country or region, and seeks to promote no religion over another. It does, however, recognize the intrinsic value of religion, even as it acknowledges that religious freedom includes the right not to believe or to practice. Integrity has been our goal as we sought to ascertain and report the status of religious freedom in all countries around the globe.

The report includes an Introduction, an Executive Summary, and a separate section on each of the 194 countries. The Introduction lays the philosophical groundwork for promoting religious freedom. While noting that there is more than one understanding of the source of human dignity, it also acknowledges a religious understanding of that source--namely, the idea that every human being possesses an intrinsic and inviolable worth that has a divine origin, and is part of the natural order of things. So understood, religious freedom can provide support for all other human rights: when the dignity of the human

person is destroyed, it is not simply a practical rule that is being violated, but the nature of the world itself. Mr. Chairman, I'm sure you'll agree that if the idea of human dignity is viewed merely as a utilitarian matter--solely the product of legislation or treaties--it becomes perishable. Any national or international standard that reflects only the norms of a given culture or historical period can be abolished for the convenience of the powerful.

Drawing from the individual reports, the Executive Summary provides a brief description of barriers to religious freedom in some 35 countries, grouped around five themes, ranging from discrimination to harsh persecution. As required by the Act, the Executive Summary includes, but is not limited to, those countries that may be designated "countries of particular concern."

Each of the 194 country reports begins with a statement about applicable laws, and outlines whether the country recognizes and/or requires registration of religious groups. It then provides a demographic overview of the population by religious affiliation, outlines problems encountered by various religious groups, describes societal attitudes, and finishes with an overview of U.S. policies.

The drafting process was similar to that used in preparing the Human Rights Reports. Our Embassies prepared initial drafts, having gathered information from a wide range of sources including religious leaders and groups, government officials, jurists, military sources, journalists, human rights monitors, and academics. Next, the texts were sent to Washington for review. Here our staff worked with regional bureaus in the State Department to analyze, corroborate and edit the reports, drawing on our own sources of information. We worked diligently to include as much factual information as possible, relying not only on our own sources, but also on material from experts in academia, non-governmental organizations, and the media. Again, just as with the Human Rights Reports, our guiding principle was to ensure that all relevant information was assessed as objectively, thoroughly, and fairly as possible. We hope that Congress finds the report to be an objective and comprehensive resource.

Countries of Particular Concern

The International Religious Freedom act also requires that the President, or, in this case his designee, the Secretary of State, review the status of religious freedom throughout the world in order to determine which countries should be designated as countries of particular concern. As the Chairman and Committee members know, we have delayed the designations in order to give the Secretary ample time to consider all the relevant data, as well as my own recommendations. She has been reading relevant parts of the Report itself, which was completed on September 8. Designations must be based on those reports, as well as on the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and all

other information available to us.

I am pleased to tell you that the Secretary has completed her review. We will shortly send to the Congress an official letter of notification, in which we will detail the Secretary's decisions with respect to any additional actions to be taken. While I am not prepared today to discuss those actions, I do wish to announce the countries that the Secretary intends to designate under the Act as "countries of particular concern." They are Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan. The Secretary also intends to identify the Taliban in Afghanistan, which we do not recognize as a government, and Serbia, which is not a country, as particularly severe violators of religious freedom. I will be happy to take your questions about the restrictions on the exercise of religious freedom in all of these areas.

I would also note that there are many other countries that our report discusses where religious freedoms appear to be suppressed. In some instances, like Saudi Arabia, those countries are beginning to take steps to address the problem. In some countries, such as North Korea, religious freedoms may be suppressed, but we lack the data to make an informed assessment. We will continue to look at these cases and collect information so that, if a country merits being designated under the Act, we will designate it.

U.S. Efforts

Secretary Albright has said that "our commitment to religious liberty is even more than the expression of American ideals. It is a fundamental source of our strength in the world." The President, the Secretary of State, and many senior U.S. officials have addressed the issue of religious freedom in venues throughout the world. As has been reported on Capitol Hill already, Secretary Albright some time ago issued formal instructions to all U.S. diplomatic posts to give more attention to religious freedom both in reporting and in advocacy.

During the period covered by this report--all of 1998 and the first 6 months of 1999--the U.S. engaged in a variety of efforts to promote the right of religious freedom and to oppose violations of that right. As prescribed in the International Religious Freedom Act, the Executive Summary describes U.S. actions actively to promote religious freedom. Drawing on the individual reports, it describes certain activities by U.S. Ambassadors, other embassy officials, and other high level U.S. officials--including the President, the Secretary and Members of Congress--as well as the activities of my own office.

Before I focus on specific countries, let me note that our staff has visited some 15 countries in the last several months, including China, Egypt, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Serbia, Russia, Indonesia, Laos, Kazakhstan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, Austria, and Belgium. We have met with hundreds of government officials, NGOs, human rights groups, religious organizations, and journalists both here and

abroad. I am delighted to report to you that our office has become a clearing house for people with information about religious persecution and discrimination, and for the persecuted themselves. By fax, telephone, email, and direct visits they tell us their stories. And we listen, record, and, when appropriate, we act. At the very least, we believe we have created a process by which their stories can be verified and integrated into our Annual report. And, with persistence and faith, perhaps our efforts will lead to a reduction in persecution and an increase in religious freedom.

Mr. Chairman, because our time is limited, I would like to highlight U.S. efforts in three countries where Congress has shown particular interest, and in which we have expended considerable diplomatic effort. I am, of course, willing to discuss with you any country about which you have concerns, but I believe these three offer a good window on some of the challenges and opportunities we are facing. They are China, Uzbekistan, and Russia. In China, our collective efforts on behalf of persecuted minorities--and I include Members of Congress in that "collective"--have been persistent and intense, but have unfortunately had little effect on the behavior of the Chinese government. In Uzbekistan, our efforts have met with some success, although it is certainly too soon to discern any long-term or systemic change for the better. In Russia, our interventions with the Russian Government have apparently blunted the effects of a bad religion law. I cite these examples, Mr. Chairman, because I think they provide a fair indication of the problem of religious persecution, how we are trying to deal with it on a day to day basis, how progress must be measured slowly and painfully, if at all--and, quite frankly, how far we have to go, even in those countries where we have seen progress.

In China, religious practice is much more widespread than it was 30 years ago, but serious and significant problems remain. Millions more people are openly engaged in religious activities today than during the years of the Cultural Revolution, when virtually all religious belief and practice was banned--and quite effectively so. Today, millions of religious adherents in many parts of China--including Buddhists and Muslims, as well as Catholics and Protestants belonging to the "official" Chinese Christian churches--worship with little governmental interference.

Yet China's Christians are "free" to worship only if they accept government-imposed registration requirements and limits. For Protestants and Catholics, this means, for example, that they are discouraged from preaching the second coming of Christ, and that their clergy are in part trained and monitored by the government. For Catholics it means they may not accept the authority of the Pope and the Magisterium in matters of faith and morals, a fundamental tenet of Roman Catholicism. Those Christians who do not accept such limits--they reportedly number in the tens of millions, and are called "underground" Christians--are at risk of detention and arrest; some have even been physically abused and tortured.

Tibetan Buddhists are "free" to practice their religion only within

government-imposed boundaries. They cannot openly display images of Tibetan Buddhism's highest spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns are subject to "patriotic reeducation" by Chinese Communist authorities. Like underground Chinese Protestants and Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists are subject to arbitrary detention, arrest, and even torture.

When we receive reports of such problems, our policy is to respond. We gather information, both at the Embassy and consulates, and here in the Department. Once we are able to confirm a detention or disappearance of a cleric or a group of worshippers, for example, we press the Chinese authorities and other sources to determine their whereabouts, welfare and status under the law.

When underground Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin of Hebei province disappeared, the Embassy immediately began efforts to ascertain his status and whereabouts, requesting information from Chinese officials in Beijing and Hebei province. Chinese officials claimed that the Bishop was free but rejected embassy requests to see him. Since his disappearance, there have been conflicting reports about Bishop Su's whereabouts and condition, but the Embassy has continued its efforts to determine his status. His case also was raised during the President's state visit to China in July 1998 and by the Secretary of State in her meetings with senior Chinese officials, as well as by Assistant Secretary Harold Hongju Koh and myself during the official human rights dialogues held in January 1999.

We will not forget Bishop Su, nor any of the other religious figures to whom outside observers have been denied any access. The names are familiar to China watchers: Pastor Xu Yongze; Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama; Abbot Chadrel Rinpoche; the Tibetan monks and nuns reported to have been beaten in prison; Pastor Li Dexian. More recently, we have noted the reported arrests of some 40 underground Protestant leaders in Henan province.

In Uzbekistan, the Government's record on respect for religious freedom has long been a source of concern. Arbitrary arrests and abuse are pervasive, and judicial proceedings are often mere rubber stamps. The pattern of harassment and detention of members of unregistered Muslim groups is alarming. Recent closed trials that fail to meet standards of basic due process have attempted to discredit members of unregistered religious groups as dangerous extremists or criminals. Defendants have been convicted of criminal offenses, reportedly based on forced confessions and planted evidence.

And yet, we have noted positive changes in recent months. Last month a few Christians were released from prison, and we have received reports that large numbers of Muslim prisoners may have been released. In addition, the government has modified and expedited the registration

process for minority religious groups. We believe registration is unnecessary, and too easily abused, but we applaud what appears to be an opening up of the process to groups which had been refused registration. The government has also agreed to review its law on religion.

Members of both the Executive and Legislative Branches have joined with the U.S. Embassy in pressing our concerns with the Government of Uzbekistan. Assistant Secretary Koh discussed arrests in the Ferghana Valley with the Uzbek Foreign Minister at the U.S.-Uzbek Joint Commission in 1998. The Ambassador at Large for the NIS discussed the religion law and issues of religious freedom with the President and Foreign Minister in November 1998. The Deputy Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the NIS met with the Foreign Minister in February 1999 to discuss religious detainees and religious freedom. This spring, I traveled to Uzbekistan and reemphasized to senior Uzbek officials the importance of concrete action, a message I repeated to the Uzbek Ambassador here in Washington. We are also aware of the extraordinary efforts of many members of Congress, from both Houses, who have delivered a strong message to the Government of Uzbekistan.

Our Embassy has also been active, persistent, and effective. Embassy officials have made frequent demarches on particular cases of disappearances, the treatment of Muslims, religious detainees, and registration procedures for religious groups. Ambassador Joseph Pressel has discussed with the Foreign Minister the disappearance of Imam Abidkhon Nazarov, as well as other religious detainees and prisoners.

In short, the U.S. Government has pressed the Uzbek government at virtually every level to take concrete actions in reducing the incidence of religious persecution in that country, and in making the kinds of structural changes that could lead to a longer-term improvement in religious freedom. We believe we are seeing a positive response from the government, and we will continue to press for more systemic changes.

Finally, let me make brief mention of Russia, where so many of you and other members of Congress have been active on behalf of religious freedom. In Russia, as the Chairman and Members know, the 1997 law on religion had the potential for creating a serious downturn in what had been an upward trend for religious freedom in post-Soviet Russia. While there remain significant problems with that law, and the potential for abuse is still there, we have not seen our worst fears confirmed. We believe this is true because the central government of Russia has acted to blunt the potential effects of the law.

We also believe that the persistent efforts of the United States at all levels, including Members of Congress, the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, senior officials, and in particular the good work of Ambassador James Collins and his Embassy staff have all contributed

to a restrained implementation of the 1997 law on the part of central authorities. Nevertheless, we remain of the opinion that the very existence of the law's graded approach to registration creates the opportunity for abuse, which we have seen happen in many regions, and we will continue working with the Russians toward a more reasonable approach. We have also been concerned about the Government of Russia's failure to act quickly and decisively against anti-Semitic actions, including statements by Duma members. We await arrests to be made for the synagogue bombings that have taken place over the past year.

Let me close, Mr. Chairman, by thanking you for your leadership in the promotion of international religious freedom, and the entire Committee for its willingness to hold this hearing. As I said at the outset, we share a common vision. It is of a world in which people of all religions are free from persecution. To create such a world, we seek to change the behavior of those regimes which engage in or tolerate abuses of religious freedom, and to signal persecutors and persecuted alike that they will not be forgotten.

But, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, there is a profoundly important point that I believe is sometimes missed in our discussions of religious freedom--a point I briefly made earlier, and one with which I am certain you will agree. Let me return to it in closing. To protect freedom of religion is not simply to shield religious belief and worship. It is that, but it is more. When we defend religious freedom, we defend every human being who is viewed as an object or a product to be used or eliminated according to the purposes of those with power. I believe that to guard religious freedom is to lift high the noblest of ideas--indeed, the idea that is the seedbed of our own democracy. It is a religious understanding of human dignity--the conviction that every person, of whatever social, economic, religious or political status, of whatever race, creed or location, is endowed by God with a value which does not rise or fall with income or productivity, with status or position, with power or weakness.

So, Mr. Chairman, let us together renew our determination to combat religious persecution and to promote religious freedom. By so doing, we hold out hope for those who live in fear because of what they believe and how they worship. By so doing, we give pause to those who contemplate tormenting others because of their religious beliefs. And, by so doing, we strengthen the very heart of human rights.

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